

Ramdan offers promise of nearness to God

by Asma Mobin-Uddin

Columbus Dispatch (Faith and Values) Oct. 29, 2004

Busy with the worldly demands of our hectic lives, many of us leave the deepest needs of the human heart unattended. For Muslims, the holy month of Ramadan, which began this year on Oct. 15, is a time to subjugate the needs of the body to tend to the needs of the heart. This month, the call of the heart and its longing for connection with God take precedence.

Every year before Ramadan starts, I am filled with anticipation, hope and usually some apprehension. I wonder if I will be able to meet the demands of the fast. Abstinence from all food and drink, even water, is required every day during daylight hours. Even in a state of hunger and fatigue, a fasting person must do his or her best to be patient, avoid harshness with anyone, show compassion and mercy to others, give of time and wealth in charity, and avoid any falsehood or bad deed.

Every year, I quickly realize that the greatest challenges of this month lie not in the physical abstinence but in the struggle to improve my character. Muslims believe God provides tremendous support, love, mercy and forgiveness for those struggling to attain piety and nearness to him. Islam teaches that, during Ramadan, God binds the forces of evil so their negative influences on people are restrained. The gates of God's mercy being wide open, even the smallest acts of goodness are rewarded exponentially by him.

What I cherish most about Ramadan are the opportunities for quiet moments in solitude with God. The stillness of the morning before dawn provides a perfect setting for communication with God. In a silence far removed from the frenzied pace of the day, with intimacy, I pour out my soul's thoughts to God. In those moments of devotion, I deeply sense God's love and compassion.

Another part I love about this sacred month are the taraweeh prayers held at the mosque every evening. During these prayers, held only in Ramadan, the Quran is usually recited in its entirety over the course of the month.

I remember the nights when I would attend taraweeh prayers regularly. Now that my children are at an age when sitting quietly is an impossibility for them, family responsibilities often keep me from spending the evening hours at the mosque. When I long for those nights of worship in prayer, I remind myself of our faith's teaching that the work of everyday living, when done with sincerity and good intentions, is also worship of God.

Ramadan is a month of gratitude. Muslims observe Ramadan out of gratitude for God's guidance as he began to reveal the Quran to humanity during this month. In addition, nothing can quite describe the gratitude one feels for God's blessings as we take the first sips of water and break our fast in the evening. Whatever we eat tastes delicious. The ability to satisfy our hunger is so precious, and we are reminded that we usually take God's bounties for granted. Our empathy for those whose hunger is not by choice is also heightened at this time, and this understanding helps us to be more generous.

Ramadan offers so much to those who observe it. During this time, the soul's yearning for the divine and its need for intimacy with God take precedence. The hope is that one's relationship with God will be better the day after Ramadan than it was before the month began.

A common reminder given from the pulpits in the final days of this blessed month is that the Lord we worship during Ramadan is the same one that presides over the month afterward. The spiritual advancement attained during the hardship of the fast should not be forgotten as the new month begins. The intimacy, hope, forgiveness, renewal and purification experienced during Ramadan should be the starting place of our spiritual journey for the rest of the year.

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